

Exploration Russia Young Russia

Cat person: photographing feline love

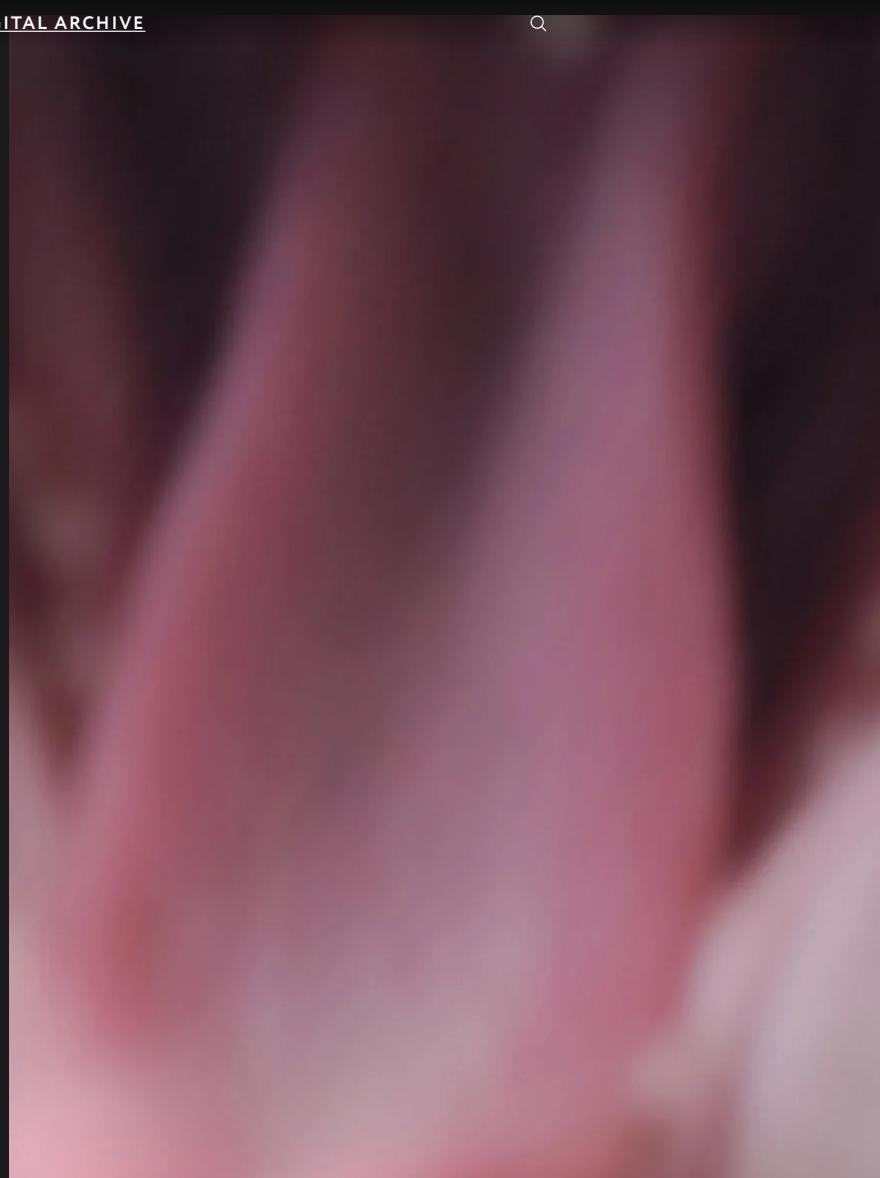
[f](#) [t](#)

8 February 2022
Text: [Anastasia Fedorova](#)
Images: [Nika Sandler](#)

Fluffy felines are a staple of online culture: after all, who hasn't fallen into a digital black hole of cute cat videos? But behind the algorithm-driven cuteness – the big eyes, the soft paws, and quirky behaviours – have we forgotten what our bond with cats is all about? In his project *Nonhuman Friends*, Russian artist [Nika Sandler](#) sets out to explore the uniqueness of the human-feline friendship – and challenge the nature of human gaze in photography.



"In June 2020, my cat Raymond died suddenly from an incurable heart disease. It was very unexpected and very painful for me," the photographer says. "It made me think about my relationship with cats. All of the brightest and most joyful moments of my life are connected with them. The idea came up to make a project in which I can express my grief for a dead friend, as well as love and gratitude to all my feline friends".



In her statement for *Nonhuman Friends* — which was also published as a book — Sadler says that the family cat was one of the first beings to show an interest in her once she'd left hospital as a baby. "Fortunately, he liked me," the photographer writes. The memory is joined by an image: a tiny baby laid upon the layers of white sheets, next to a cat more than twice her size. The animal's body is imprinted upon the white like a graceful shadow.



The picture, like many in Sandler's project, is slightly uncanny. Her images do not fit the stereotypical representation of cats we're used to seeing on the internet. The photographer zooms in on a glowing amber eye or a fluffy ear, or sometimes tries to see the world from the cat's perspective. "I searched for videos where cameras had been attached to cats' collars, and took screenshots," says Sandler. This way, it was possible to look at the world — people, other animals, objects — as if through a cat's eyes. I did this because it was important for me to give cats subjectivity, because they are usually assigned the role of an object of human gaze."



To take her images, Sandler largely relied on her memories and perception of cats. But she was also inspired by the cult Japanese photographer Masahisa Fukase, who photographed his cats in his signature, slightly gritty, black and white aesthetic. Sandler often turns to non-human agents in her work: animals, plants, mushrooms, or stones. "I like to look for ways to look at the world from a non-anthropocentric perspective. I also explore themes related to pleasure, pain, categories of creepy and disgusting," she says.



Apart from being a testament of love for cats, *Nonhuman Friends* explores the complexity of our experience of the world – and how these uncertainties or juxtapositions are something we knowingly hide from. In Sandler's work, that complexity lies in images which are strange, blurry, fleeting, too sad, or too honest – things which often don't make it into the realms of curated online cutie.

"It seems to me that cute content is about objectifying animals and exploiting them for the sake of promotion and, possibly, sales. It's no secret that the presence of animals in photos and videos increases views and coverage on Instagram," the photographer says. "In addition, many animals don't like to be photographed, even if you shoot them in silent mode, without a flash, and so on. But it will most likely be very difficult to give up [photographing cute animals]: animals have always attracted people with their immanent beauty."

